

Consider What Comes First,
Then What Follows, and Then Act



Cultivate the habit of surveying and testing a prospective action before undertaking it. Before you proceed, step back and look at the big picture, lest you act rashly on raw impulse. Determine what happens first, consider what that leads to, and then act in accordance with what you've learned.

When we act without circumspection, we might begin a task with great enthusiasm; then, when unforeseen or unwanted consequences follow, we shamefully retreat and are filled with regret: "I would have done this; I could have done that; I should have done it differently."

Suppose you wanted to be victorious at the Olympic Games. That's fine, but fully consider what you're getting yourself into. What does such a desire entail? What needs to happen first? Then what? What will be required of you? And what else follows from that? Is this whole course of action really beneficial to you? If so, carry on.

If you wish to win at the Olympic Games, to prepare yourself properly you would have to follow a strict regimen that stretches you to the limits of your endurance. You would have to submit to demanding rules, follow a suitable diet, vigorously exercise at a regular time in both heat and cold, and give up drinking. You would have to follow the directions of your trainer as if he or she were your doctor. Then, once you are actually in competition, there's a good chance you'd be hurled into a ditch. You might injure your arm, sprain your

ankle, get your face slammed in the mud; and after going through all this, you might still be defeated.

After you have contemplated all these possibilities—mindful of all the things that might happen and their consequences—and if your resolve is still strong, then exercise your judgment. If the overall picture still seems beneficial, then do enter the Games—wholeheartedly.

By considering the big picture, you distinguish yourself from the mere dabbler, the person who plays at things as long as they feel comfortable or interesting. This is not noble. Think things through and fully commit! Otherwise, you will be like a child who sometimes pretends he or she is a wrestler, sometimes a soldier, sometimes a musician, sometimes an actor in a tragedy.

Unless we fully give ourselves over to our endeavors, we are hollow, superficial people and we never develop our natural gifts. We've all known people who, like monkeys, mimic whatever seems novel and flashy at the moment. But then their enthusiasm and efforts wane; they drop their projects as soon as they become too familiar or demanding.

A half-hearted spirit has no power. Tentative efforts lead to tentative outcomes. Average people enter into their endeavors headlong and without care. Perhaps they meet with an exemplary figure like Euphrates and become inspired to excel themselves. It is all well and good to do this, but consider first the real nature of your aspirations, and measure that against your capacities.

Be honest with yourself. Clearly assess your strengths and weaknesses. Do you have what it takes to compete at this time? To be a wrestler, for instance, requires extraordinary strength in one's shoulders, back, and thighs. Do you have the physical prowess and agility to be among the best in this sport? It is one thing to wish to be a champion or to do something skillfully; it is another to actually do it and to do it with consummate skill. Different people are made for different things.

Just as certain capacities are required for success in a particular area, so too are certain sacrifices required. If you wish to become proficient in the art of living with wisdom, do you think that you can eat and drink to excess? Do you think you can continue to succumb to anger and your usual habits of frustration and unhappiness? No. If true wisdom is your object and you are sincere, you will have work to do on yourself. You will have to overcome many unhealthy cravings and knee-jerk reactions. You will have to reconsider whom you associate with. Are your friends and associates worthy people? Does their influence—their habits, values, and behavior—elevate you or reinforce the slovenly habits from which you seek escape? The life of wisdom, like anything else, demands its price. You may, in following it, be ridiculed and even end up with the worst of everything in all parts of your public life, including your career, your social standing, and your legal position in the courts.

Once you have given due consideration to all of

the constituent details that compose the effort to live the higher life, venture forth with your utmost effort. Make the necessary sacrifices that are the price for the worthiest of goals: freedom, even-mindedness, and tranquility. If, however, upon honestly appraising your mettle, you are not fit or ready, free yourself from delusion and tread a different, more realistic road.

If you try to be something you're not or strive for something completely beyond your present capacities, you end up as a pathetic dabbler, trying first to be a wise person, then a bureaucrat, then a politician, then a civic leader. These roles are not consistent. You can't be flying off in countless directions, however appealing they are, and at the same time live an integrated, fruitful life.

You can only be one person—either a good person or a bad person. You have two essential choices. Either you can set yourself to developing your reason, cleaving to truth, or you can hanker after externals. The choice is yours and yours alone. You can either put your skills toward internal work or lose yourself to externals, which is to say, be a person of wisdom or follow the common ways of the mediocre.